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ABSTRACT

This paper first compares Vermont's old Individualized Education Plan (IEP) which was designed primarily to insure legal compliance with the new family-centered IEP. It then describes the new IEP. Vermont's new family-centered IEP process emphasizes increased collaboration, reduced paperwork, and legal compliance. Three questions serve as a focus for the process. The first concerns what is known about the student, including level of performance and students' strengths and needs. The second question involves the types of special educational provisions and services the student will receive. The third question concerns evaluating whether the provisions are successful, as determined by goals, objectives, and measurable criteria. The process, which discourages the use of draft IEPs prepared before the IEP meeting, begins with an empty page consisting of three blank columns, one for each of the key questions. Final IEP team decisions are recorded after consensus has been reached, and jargon and technical terminology are discouraged. Listing interventions, services, accommodations, and transitions services in a shortened format promotes a holistic approach and a greater chance of implementing instructionally useful programming. The new process seeks to maximize parent participation. Using a creative problem solving process, team members are encouraged to generate as many ideas as possible, after which the ideas which show the greatest promise are selected. Attachments include parents and teachers comments on the new IEP; IEP Planning Guide/Checklist; and IEP Participant Worksheet. (Contains 13 references.) (SW)

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Improved Collaboration, Less Paperwork:

Vermont's New Family Centered IEP Process

Annual Meeting of the Council for Exceptional Children

April 8, 1995

Indianapolis, Indiana

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ABSTRACT

The Vermont Department of Education is presently implementing a new special education process driven by a set of forms which look very different than the ones that preceded them. But, is the new IEP planning process really different? Consider the following comparison:

Forms Driven Process

Vermont's old IEP planning process, which was designed primarily to insure legal compliance, had four key features, each of which is described below:

- **Focus on Forms**. The old process was designed in response to federal monitoring and an increase in litigation involving special education issues. A set of mandated forms was developed by parent advocates, attorneys, and State Department of Education personnel which, if filled out completely, would greatly increase the probability that schools would meet compliance standards and prevail in due process proceedings.
- **Draft Approach**. The overall format of the mandated IEP form did not lend itself to collaborative planning because of its compliance orientation. Most IEP planning meetings using the old process were structured around a draft IEP document prepared in advance by the special educator. Parents and other team members were encouraged to suggest additions or changes.

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- **Legal and Technical Language**. The mandated IEP form generally relied on regulatory terminology and included sections designed to directly address compliance concerns. For example, one section was made up entirely of calculations which indicated the percent of time the student spent in regular education programs and environments. These IEP sections, and the language and concepts which were used, provided direct indicators of procedural compliance.

- **Segmented Approach**. The IEP form included separate pages which related to each of the federal requirements, again greatly facilitating compliance monitoring.

Family Centered Process

In contrast, Vermont's new IEP planning process, which was designed to increase collaboration, reduce paperwork and insure legal compliance, has seven key features, each of which is described in detail below:

- **Focus on Three Key Questions**. The process is organized around Bateman's (1991) three-fold inquiry, using three key questions which have been adapted to promote the use of common, jargon-free language. The three key questions serve as an embedded agenda for team meetings, and also provide an organizational format for the IEP document. In composite, the three questions address all federal IEP requirements. *"What do we know about _____?"* meets the IDEA requirement for present level of performance, as well as information about the student's strengths and needs, unique characteristics, and personal goals for transition planning. *"What are we going to do to help _____ receive an appropriate education?"* meets the IDEA requirement for description of special education and related services, personnel, frequency, duration, location, and amount of service. *"How will we know if we are succeeding?"* meets the IDEA requirement for annual goal(s) and short term objectives, including objective criteria, evaluation procedures and expected dates for accomplishment.

- **Blank Page Approach**. The new process discourages the use of "draft" IEPs prepared prior to the IEP meeting by special educators. Draft IEPs chill the interactive planning process described in Appendix C, instead encouraging parents and classroom teachers to serve a "rubber stamp" function (Halpern, 1987). The new "nonform" IEP form is comprised of three blank columns, one for each of the key questions. Compliance oriented descriptors are listed at the bottom of each column to help teams ensure that entries in the columns will include all information required by the IDEA. Even though the IEP document is minimalist by design, in practice, most Vermont schools who have tried the new process have used blank chart paper to record key IEP team decisions, allowing all team members to follow and review key points in the

facilitate the creation of IEPs which truly reflect the individual strengths and challenges presented by the student.

- **Direct Link Between Present Levels of Performance, Services, and Goals and Objectives.** Unlike more typical IEPs which rely on formal, legal terms such as "present levels of performance," "specialized instruction," "related services," etc., the three key questions used in the new process were designed to promote IEPs that are integrative and comprehensive. The answer to the question "What do we know about John" serves as a starting place for a discussion of what might constitute an appropriate education for John, and also sets the parameters for answering the question, "How will we know if we are succeeding" through which goals, objectives, and measurable criteria are established. For example, if what the team knows about John is that he can write a simple sentence, but not a compound sentence, it's logical that an appropriate education for John would include specialized instruction aimed at teaching him to write compound sentences, and that criteria for determining success would involve some measure of John's sentence writing skills. This diagnostic-instructional link is a necessary component of individualized instruction and is a unique feature of specialized instruction as described by the EAHCA (Pyecha, et al., 1980; Schenck & Levy, 1979; Schenck, 1980; Ysseldyke, Algozzine, Richey & Graden, 1982). The three question approach also enhances the communicative function of the IEP because the IEP team collaborates to identify goals, objectives, and objective criteria which all members, including parents and classroom teachers, agree will demonstrate success.

- **Holistic Approach - Interventions, Services, Accommodations, Transition Services, etc. are Listed in the Same Section of the IEP.** In Vermont's previous process, IEP documents were a minimum of ten pages long. The IEP form included a cover sheet, a page of definitions, and an array of individual pages with the following headings: Levels of Performance and Annual Goals, Short Term Objectives, Special Education Program, Determination of Time in the Regular Education Program, Justification for Removal from the Regular Education Environment, Reintegration Plan, Transition Plan, and Accommodations. Although this document made it easy for schools to demonstrate compliance, separating all the key components of the IEP greatly reduced the document's educational relevance (Bateman, 1991; Dudley-Marling, 1985).

  The new IEP is a minimum of 4 pages long, including a cover sheet, page of definitions, and an "IEP Checklist". All of the information that was placed on separate pages in the old IEP, is now entered in the middle column of the main IEP page under the heading, "What are we going to do to provide _____ with an appropriate education." This approach promotes holistic, and instructionally useful programming which stands a greater chance of being implemented (Bateman, 1991). For example,

discussion. Final IEP team decisions are recorded on the nonform after consensus has been reached.

- **Uses Common Language.** The language used in the three key questions sets the tone for discussions during the IEP meeting, where jargon, technical terminology, and complex conceptual discussions are discouraged. Understandable, jargon-free questions such as "What do we know about Mary?" generally produce understandable, jargon-free responses such as, "Mary is having trouble reading the textbooks used in her 8th grade classes," which, in turn, can lead to interventions which are problem-specific, pragmatic and workable. Harry (1992) cited legal and technical language as the primary obstacle to collaboration between parents and school authorities, and suggested that effective leadership can produce an atmosphere of "communicative competence" which can empower parents. The emphasis on common language also serves classroom teachers, and is especially important in light of recent changes in the IDEA which mandate that students, aged 14-16 and older, participate in the transition planning component of IEP development.

- **Promotes Participation of All Team Members in a Creative Problem Solving Process.** The benefits of this feature are two-fold. First, the new process has been designed to maximize parent participation. As noted above, parent participation is encouraged by the use of a blank page approach to IEP planning, and by avoiding special education jargon, technical language, and formal, hyperlegal forms. Not only is parent participation legally required, but it has been generally regarded in the literature as valuable in regards to positive student outcomes (Hanline, Suchman & Demmerle, 1989; Turnbull & Turnbull, 1986; Van Reusen & Bos, 1994).The new process also incorporates several of the overarching principles of the Creative Problem Solving Method (Giangreco, 1993; Parnes, 1985) which promote participation of all team members, including parents. Although the diagnostic and prescriptive expertise of special educators is still important, facilitation based on the Creative Problem Solving Method is central to the new process' potential for success. Through effective facilitation, the special educator can promote a sense of trust and optimism among team members, and can guide discussion in a way which encourages all team members to participate. The special educator-facilitator also organizes discussion to reflect the most critical element of Creative Problem Solving, the alternate application of divergent and convergent thinking. During the divergent phase, team members are encouraged to be creative and to generate as many ideas as possible. Evaluation and judgement of individual ideas are discouraged during the divergent phase. During the convergent phase, team members review ideas and select those which show the greatest promise. Only those ideas are listed on the IEP document. Overall, Creative Problem Solving has the potential to

if what the IEP team knows about Mary is that her reading skills are below grade level, their response to the question "What are we going to do to provide Mary with an appropriate education" would likely include direct instruction to improve her reading skills, accommodations such as oral testing which allow her to participate in classroom activities that may exceed her skill level, and, perhaps, counseling to help her address problems with self esteem which have resulted from being a non-reader. All of this information is entered into the IEP document as a single unit, along with notes on personnel, frequency, duration, location, and amounts of service.

- **Checklist to Insure that Legal Requirements are Satisfied.** In keeping with the divergent-convergent thinking model that is a critical feature of Creative Problem Solving, in the new IEP process teams are encouraged to first concentrate on meeting student needs, and after the team is satisfied that they have created an appropriate program, they edit the IEP document so that all content requirements stipulated in the IDEA are satisfied. This task is accomplished using the "IEP Checklist."

The new Family Centered IEP process resulted from a year of planning by parents, teachers, educators, and legal experts, and an additional year of field testing in seven Vermont schools (See Table 1 for field test data). It represents the best information available in the IEP literature. In addition to promoting collaboration and legal compliance, the new IEP process provides teams with flexibility which can result in programs that work for students, with a minimum of paperwork for educators.

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Participant Satisfaction With Vermont's New Family Centered IEP Process

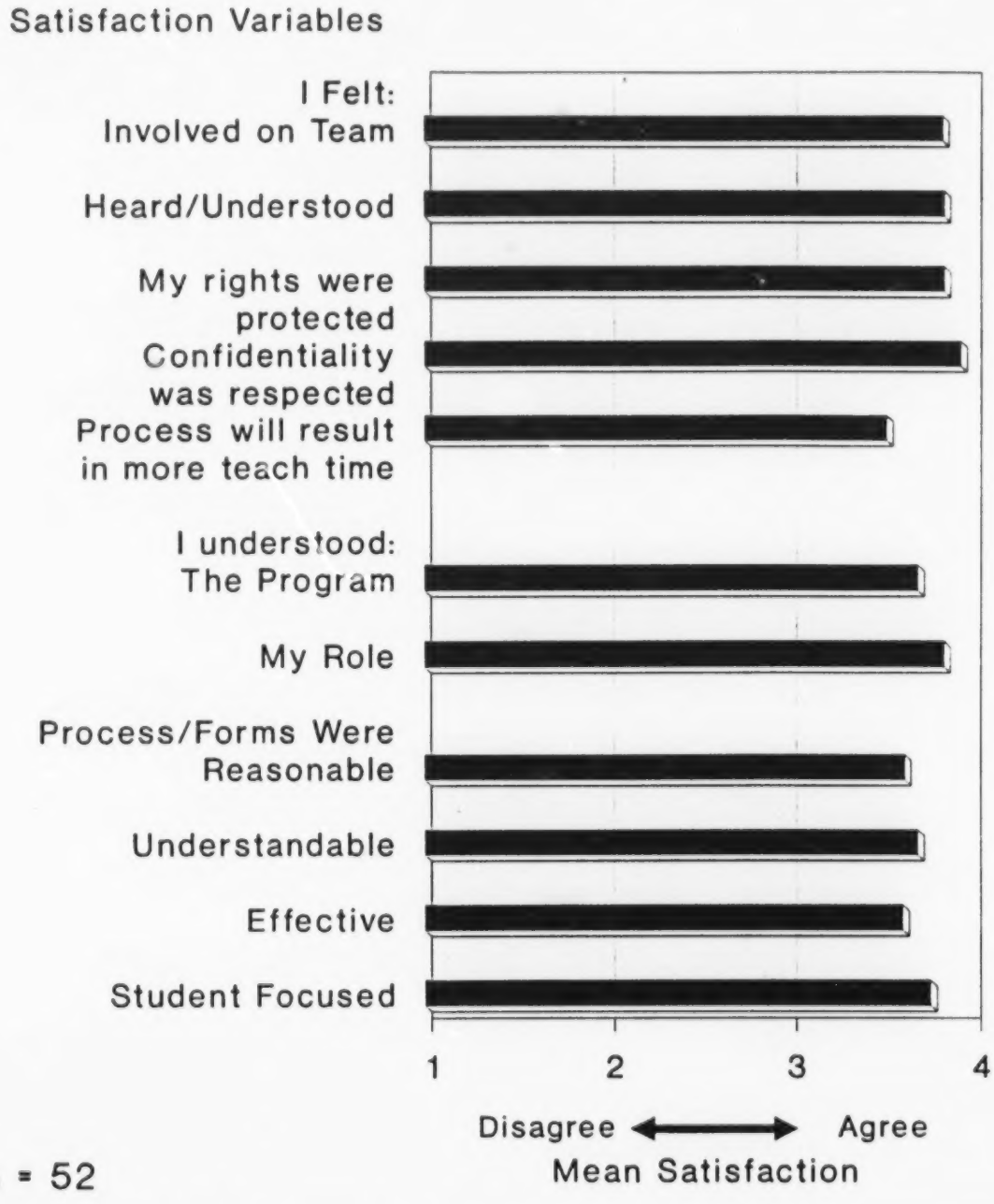

Table 1

Mean Responses of Three Pilot Evaluation Participant Groups to a Questionnaire Designed to Assess Satisfaction with the New Family Centered IEP Process

Prompt	Respondents		
	Parents[a]	Classroom Teachers[b]	Special Educators[c]
1. I feel involved as a team member	3.56	3.95	3.94
2. I feel I was heard & understood	3.65	3.95	3.88
3. I feel there was a good understanding of the student's strengths & needs	3.59	3.95	3.75
4. I feel like I have a good understanding of the program developed today	3.41	3.84	3.81
5. I feel like I understand my responsibilities in providing services	3.65	3.95	3.88
6. I feel the paperwork process was:			
a. Reasonable	3.63	3.79	3.43
b. Understandable	3.69	3.82	3.56
c. Effective	3.63	3.76	3.43
7. I feel this process will result in more time for teachers to devote to student learning	3.50	3.67	3.38
8. I feel my rights & responsibilities were understood & protected	3.76	3.88	3.85
9. I feel that confidentiality was respected	3.76	4.00	4.00

Note. Judgements were made on 4-point scales (4 = strongly agree, 1 = strongly disagree).

[a] $n = 17$. [b] $n = 19$. [c] $n = 16$.

INDIVIDUALIZED EDUCATION PROGRAM DESCRIPTION

Student Name _____

What do we know about _____	What are we going to do to help _____ receive an appropriate education?	How will we know if we are succeeding?
Include present levels of performance, the students's unique characteristics and needs and/or personal educational goals.	Include special education amd related services, personnel, frequency, duration, locatgion, and amount of service, and if necessary, accommodations, transition services and activities.	Include goals and objectives which include evaluation procedures, objective criteria, and the expected dates for accomplishment.

IEP PLANNING GUIDE/CHECKLIST

Student Name: _____ IEP Meeting Date: __/__/__

DID YOU REMEMBER TO:

- ☐ Record the date of initiation of services and the duration?
- ☐ Plan an adaptive physical education program for those students who cannot participate in the regular physical education program (not applicable for essential early education)?
- ☐ Document parent participation if parents were not in attendance?
- ☐ Discuss the applicable section(s) of the Parental Rights in Special Education?
- ☐ Indicate the percent of time the student participates in the regular education program? If you have not, provide the information below:

  _____
  _____
  _____
  _____

- ☐ Consider the full continuum of alternative placements? Please document you Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) discussion below:

  _____
  _____
  _____
  _____

- ☐ Indicate by marking with an (R) the goals and objectives which address the reintegration of the student into the regular education environment for those students who are removed from the regular education environment for more than 50% of the time?
- ☐ Discuss transition issues for those students 16 years of age and older by planning services based on individual needs, taking into account the student's preferences and interests, and including instruction, community experience, and development of employment and other post-school adult living objectives?
- ☐ Provide a rationale if the team feels that transition services are not needed in instruction, community experiences, or the development of employment and other post-school adult living objectives? Please provide a rationale below:

  _____
  _____
  _____
  _____

- ☐ Take other steps to ensure that the student's preferences and interests are considered if the student did not attend the meeting? If an agency was invited to send a representative to a meeting and did not do so, what other steps did you take to obtain their participation in the planning of any transition services?

  _____
  _____
  _____

PARENTS ARE SAYING...

"I feel like I have an important role."

"This makes sense and is simpler."

"I like the language. I can understand it."

"I am pleased to see my tax dollar go for this. Keep up the good work."

"My husband and I felt we were a contributing factor to our son's learning process."

"Having Zach participate was empowering for him. I know he did not say very much, but he understood what was going on. I believe if children are involved ... they will become viable assets to the process."

TEACHERS ARE SAYING...

"The language of the IEP was really in lay-terms."

"Excellent Process!!"

"The forms encourage collaboration. Overall, it is great."

"Without this regulation relief, I wouldn't be here now."

"This particular meeting gave a brand new teacher a better picture of her student and brought forth more areas and ways to coordinate special education and classroom programs."

"As a classroom teacher who has been involved in IEP meetings in the past, the meeting was far superior."

IMPROVED COLLABORATION, LESS PAPERWORK
VERMONT'S NEW FAMILY CENTERED IEP PROCESS

Participant Worksheet

While you're waiting for the session to begin...

DIRECTIONS: During this session we will be discussing a new approach for developing IEPs which promotes full participation by all team members, particularly parents and students. Think about the IEP meetings you've attended. What are some of the things you've observed that were either facilitators or inhibitors, that is, methods, procedures or strategies that promoted or discouraged participation. List them below.

FACILITATORS	INHIBITORS